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A STUDY IN THE TEACHING OF A MOTHER-TONGUE¹

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During the past few years, the most conspicuous discussions of the perennial question of good English have consisted largely of accusations of illiteracy against the graduates of American schools and colleges. Thanks to the diverting blunders of each year's output of graduates, it has been fairly easy to support these accusations with an array of examples at once convincing and entertaining. The easy accessibility of illustrative material may be partly responsible for the fact that sweeping condemnation of bad English has long been a favorite theme with a certain group of educational critics, whose specialty is the making of novel and startling assertions for newspaper consumption. The bolder spirits among them, being willing to risk controversy, have gone farther and have attempted to fix the blame upon some particular agency—for example, parents, newspapers, elementary- or secondary-school teachers, college professors, or hyphenated citizens. The resulting disputes have served to arouse a certain amount of public interest—in the disputants, at least—but they cannot be said to have settled the question of responsibility, nor to have aided materially in the solution of the problem. Fortunately, there is still another class of critics, who, instead of engaging in futile controversies, give their efforts to a quiet and searching investigation of the question as a whole, and thus obtain a basis for constructive recommendations. That there are many who approach the problem in this spirit, the columns of the *English Journal* and of other educational periodicals attest; but because their propaganda is characterized by temperateness and conservatism, it is likely to receive less immediate attention than is warranted by its merit.

¹*How the French Boy Learns to Write.* By Rollo Walter Brown. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916. \$1.25 postpaid.

An unusually careful and comprehensive study belonging to the last-mentioned class is the book just issued by the Harvard University Press, entitled, *How the French Boy Learns to Write*. The author, Professor Rollo Walter Brown, of Wabash College, after making a considerable investigation of the French school system and especially of French methods of teaching rhetoric and literature, spent a year in France visiting *écoles* and *lycées*, in order to gain first-hand impressions of the French methods of teaching the mother-tongue. Although this study was undertaken because of the well-known excellence of composition in the French schools, it is clearly not intended as an attack, even impliedly, upon American teachers of English or upon their methods. Rather, it is a disinterested effort to render accessible to American teachers the best thought and practice of the French educational system. To be sure, one is often involuntarily reminded of Sterne's saying, "They order this matter better in France," but it is only fair to add that this conclusion is reached, not only because of the author's enthusiasm, but also because of the facts themselves. If in some cases American practice, or much of it, suffers by comparison, and if the French classroom procedure sometimes seems utopian, we may remind ourselves that the conditions described are actual, and that the author's purpose is to present the best that France has to offer. At the same time, it should be noted that because of the close centralization of French schools, the homogeneity of students in the primary and secondary groups, the emphasis placed on expression in subjects other than composition, and the social tradition in favor of good language, it is possible for the class work in the mother-tongue to attain a high standard, approaching these seemingly ideal conditions.

In summarizing a few of the principal divisions of Professor Brown's book, one is tempted to select only those matters which one feels to be most neglected in American schools. To do this, however, would not be entirely fair, either to the author or to the schools of this country. Since the author's purpose is to consider the whole question of the mother-tongue, and since the practice of American teachers varies widely, it has seemed better to mention some things that are done in this country as well as certain things

that are frequently left undone. The reader can decide for himself whether a particular part of the French system is sufficiently familiar to be considered American as well, or whether it is essentially a departure from our methods. Even where a marked resemblance appears between the methods of teachers in the two countries, the known efficiency of the French system should give courage to those who are already working according to the same principles.

The classification of French schools and the closely centralized system of school administration have much to do with the effectiveness of instruction in the mother-tongue. Although the minister of public instruction, as a cabinet official, has rather a brief and uncertain tenure of office, the three *directeurs* in charge of the three principal grades of instruction hold office for an indefinitely long period and are thus enabled to maintain a consistent administrative policy. In the sixteen *académies* or administrative units of the country, the head of the university in each unit is ex officio superintendent of the schools. Through these officials, as well as through numerous inspectors at large, the minister and the *directeurs* are able to keep in close touch with the educational affairs of the nation. In compactness of organization, the French national system resembles the closely unified school systems of some of our large cities. Because of the uniformity, both in the curricula and in the methods of instruction, trustworthy generalizations may be made from the examination of comparatively few cases. As between the two kinds of schools considered, the "primary" and the "secondary," which run parallel from the lower grades, there is of course a wide difference in subject-matter and emphasis. The former schools, designed for those pupils who do not expect to attend a university, naturally emphasize practical education, and, in the upper grades, vocational training. The course in the secondary schools, which is a year longer, extending to what would be the end of the Sophomore year in American colleges, is made up of liberal subjects. The instruction in composition is adapted to the interests and aims of the students in the primary and secondary schools, respectively. In both schools, however, a great deal of composition work is required, and, judging from the programs of study, the methods are essentially the same. In both groups pro-

vision is made for the study of the mother-tongue in a series of carefully graded exercises, as follows: reading; penmanship; memory exercises; oral work designed to teach self-expression and to correct faults in pronunciation; exercises in copying; orthography (not in separate spelling-lists, but in whole passages); grammar; analysis of propositions (no diagramming); explication of texts; original compositions, planned to develop observation, imagination, and judgment; historical grammar, with emphasis on Latin derivatives and the language of the French classical period; and extensive reading of the more difficult classics, the simpler ones having been used from the beginning for exercises in reading, memory, and dictation.

The drill which a pupil receives in the mother-tongue is especially well-suited to develop accuracy and a keen language sense. Much written work is required, and all exercises are graded carefully, including those which are written in other than language subjects. In the general notebook, which is a record of the pupil's work in all subjects, a high standard of composition is required. Exercises in dictation are frequently given, with the result that a surprising degree of accuracy is attained, not only in the native language but also in English. In two hundred pages of exercises in English written by pupils from nine to twelve years old, only seven words were misspelled. In one school, apparently a very good one, Professor Brown dictated a short paragraph to twenty-eight boys, eleven and twelve years old, and received eleven perfect papers, five others with only one mistake each, and no paper with more than ten errors. Out of five hundred papers received from American pupils of the same age in eighteen different schools, only eleven were perfect, and some manuscripts contained as many as forty mistakes. Of five hundred college Freshmen, forty-seven wrote perfect papers. The frequent dictation exercises not only give the French pupil a great advantage in accuracy, but also free him from the feeling that spoken and written discourse are essentially different. His own writing, thus, instead of being artificial and stiff, becomes easy and natural.

The French pupil's confidence in his own use of language is developed chiefly by exercises in grammar and vocabulary. Although

French grammar in the schools has recently undergone a considerable revision, especially in the standardizing of nomenclature, a great deal of "formal grammar" is still taught, frankly and without apology. Exercises in grammar are chiefly oral, and are usually based on a complete passage from the classics. Rules are not laid down arbitrarily, but are reached inductively or verified by the teacher and the class working together. The sentence is the unit. Even declensions and conjugations are illustrated by the use of words in sentences, and the analysis of propositions is an important part of the work. Historical grammar, particularly that of the classical period, is taught, and is assimilated to a remarkable extent.

The study of words includes not merely definitions, but practice in the use of words and a study of derivatives as well. A typical case was the study of the word "associate" in one class, and the use and explanation of such words as "social" and "society." Throughout a pupil's courses he is given exercises designed to enlarge, to sharpen, and to quicken his vocabulary, both in French and in foreign languages. One small boy, when asked if he understood the word "skyscraper," replied, after an instant's hesitation, "You must mean an aeroplane." The zest which he showed in arriving at a probable definition, and which other pupils showed in asking questions, is evidently characteristic of French boys in their language study.

Literature in the French schools is suggestive in the freshness of its presentation and also in the emphasis placed on thought. The French teachers as a rule discourage the reading of books *about* literature, and insist upon a very careful reading of the works themselves. This reading is preceded by oral instructions as to how the work is to be studied, and is followed by the explication, which is an oral test of the pupil's understanding and appreciation. The example given in the book of M. Bezar's method of teaching literature (pp. 129-47), which cannot be adequately summarized here, will be found full of interest and of practical suggestion. That part of the courses of study which includes the list of French classics read and studied at various stages of the pupil's progress is also suggestive. To find English parallels for La Fontaine, Daudet, Lamartine, and the other writers, and to arrange the English

classics in a graded series corresponding to the French, or to place our present lists of classics alongside the French lists, would be an interesting experiment in elementary comparative literature.

The real test of a student's knowledge and appreciation of literature comes in the baccalaureate examinations. As will be seen from the examples cited below, the questions given in these examinations are also a test of the student's power of original thinking and of his skill in writing:

Victor Hugo has written this sentence, rich in meaning in its conciseness: "Lyrical genius: to be oneself; dramatic genius: to be others." What do you think about it? (Poitiers, July, 1907.) [P. 72.]

Who is your favorite poet? Explain the kind of pleasure that you derive from reading him. *Above all, refrain from reciting a lesson you have learned; say simply and as elegantly as you can, that which you have understood, you.* And do not write upon this subject unless you can discuss a poet who is known to you through your own reading of his works and whom you prefer to all others through your own personal taste. Literary platitudes will only injure your case. Give extreme care to organization and style. (Rennes, July, 1913.) [P. 73.]

The influence of dictation, grammar, word-study, and literature naturally reveals itself in the pupil's work in composition. It is aided, moreover, by a multitude of other forces which are favorable to the development of skill and taste in the use of his native speech. The study of Latin, usually taught in the secondary schools by the teacher of French, tends to establish the student firmly in the knowledge of his native tongue. The social prejudice in favor of good writing causes those who rank high in their examinations (largely a matter of composition) to receive equal praise with the prize-winners in athletic contests. In a suggestive chapter on "Organized Language Tradition," Professor Brown deals at length with the nature of this social bias, its growth, its influence on composition (the most social of the arts), and the possibilities of developing an American attitude that shall be helpful to those who are striving to improve the use of the mother-tongue. More than upon any other influence, the efficiency of the French system of training pupils to write depends upon the teacher. Accordingly, the author has treated in full the French teacher's status and his distinctive characteristics. His thorough preparation, his permanent

tenure, his relatively high social standing, his devotion to his profession, his enthusiasm in the classroom, his skill in questioning, and his conscientious attention to details—all are studied for their bearing on the teaching of the mother-tongue.

One lays down the book with the feeling of having been personally conducted on a pleasant, interesting, and stimulating tour of inspection through the French schools. It is singularly fortunate that this study was made at a time (1912-13) when France was at her best, industrially and educationally; when the blight of war had not yet fallen upon her, and the achievements of a toilsome upward struggle since the days of the Second Empire had reached their full fruition. Today, a description of French classrooms would deal, not with methods and the free play of minds, but with scenes showing the tragedy of wounded national pride, as in Daudet's pathetic story, *La dernière classe*. It is in the spirit of France at peace, however, that this book should be read. And in the picture of the French schools before the war there is much that is suggestive and inspiring for American teachers of the mother-tongue. By viewing the question as a whole, we are given a new sense of its magnitude and complexity, and of the interdependence of the various agencies for educational progress. Moreover, we are left with a deeper conviction that these agencies must work in harmony; that advancement will come, not through jealous bickering, but through intelligent and sympathetic co-operation.